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TAGS: [PINS](#) [PTER](#) [MOPS](#) [KISL](#) [MY](#) [RP](#)
SUBJECT: AFP-MILF MEET TO SEEK SUPPORT FOR MINDANAO PEACE
AT A "CRUCIAL STAGE"

REF: A. MANILA 1543
[B](#). MANILA 1243
[C](#). MANILA 952
[D](#). MANILA 828
[E](#). MANILA 281

[1](#). (SBU) Summary: Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) officers exchanged views on the peace process and cease-fire mechanisms during an unprecedented roundtable discussion on June 9. Participants cited the MILF's expeditious rescue and turnover of four kidnapping victims to the AFP May 31-June 1 and use of the Ad Hoc Joint Action Group (AHJAG) to prevent Abu Sayyaf Group and Jemaah Islamiyah members in the Sulu Archipelago from relocating to central Mindanao as successes. While the cease-fire continues to hold, challenges remain on-the-ground, including "rido" (clan feuds), conflicts over personal interests, land and water supply issues, availability of firearms, inadequate support and/or mishandling of internally displaced persons, the presence of terrorists, criminal syndicates, and other lawless elements, and the emergence of "a third party" determined to sabotage the peace process. Philippine Government Peace Panel Chairman Secretary Silvestre Afable Jr. requested support from the AFP, MILF, foreign diplomatic community, and civil society groups in overcoming obstacles to a strong, just, and durable peace agreement for Mindanao at this "crucial stage."
End Summary.

First-ever Roundtable

[2](#). (SBU) On June 9, the Malaysia-led International Monitoring Team (IMT) sponsored an unprecedented roundtable discussion on the peace process and cease-fire mechanisms in Cotabato City for commanders and officers of the AFP and the MILF's Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF). The 30 AFP and 20 BIAF participants all wore red, blue, or beige sport shirts bearing the logo "1st AFP-BIAF Roundtable Discussion." However, many of the MILF's key field commanders were not present,

[3](#). (SBU) The roundtable panel included IMT Chief of Mission Major-General Dato Md Ismail Bin Ahmad Khan, Philippine Government Coordinating Committee for the Cessation of Hostilities (CCCH) Chairman Brigadier-General Edgardo M. Guerrea, MILF/CCCH Chairman Von Al Haq, Philippine Government AHJAG Chairman Major-General Benjamin Mohammad Dolorfino, MILF/AHJAG Chairman Attorney Abdul Dataya, Philippine Government Peace Panel Chairman Afable, Oblate Father With Mary Immaculate (OMI) Inter-Religious Dialogue Coordinator Father Roberto C. Layson, Bangsamoro Development Agency Ustadz Abdul Kadir Abdullah, and Institute for Autonomy and

Governance Executive Director Attorney Benedicto Bacani, who served as moderator.

¶4. (SBU) Among the observers were U.S., Canadian, Japanese, and Libyan diplomats, members of civil society/non-governmental organizations (including Bantay Cease-fire, Non-Violent Peace Force, and Geneva Call), and the media.

"Peace on the Horizon"

¶5. (SBU) IMT Chief of Staff Lt. Col. Mustapha Bin Omar opened the forum by commenting that "we are here today because we all believe there is light at the end of the tunnel." As he highlighted the 70-80 percent decrease in armed encounters since the IMT's deployment to Mindanao in October 2004 and the absence of fighting for the past seven months in Shariff Aguak, Maguindanao Province and the past three months in Midsayap, North Cotabato Province, Omar proclaimed that "peace is on the horizon."

¶6. (SBU) IMT Chief of Mission MG Khan emphasized the primacy of the peace process when describing the mission, role, objectives, and mandate of the 60-man IMT, which currently includes 10 members from Brunei, 9 members from Libya, and 1 member from Japan. Khan noted that Canada and Sweden may also become members of the IMT in the future.

Cease-fire Holds, amidst challenges

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¶7. (SBU) The Philippine Government CCCH Chairman BG Guerrea described the cease-fire mechanisms -- IMT, CCCH, AHJAG, and Local Monitoring Teams (LMT) -- as "very effective" in providing the relative peace that allowed the Philippine Government-MILF Peace Panels to tackle substantive issues during negotiations. According to BG Guerrea another LMT will soon deploy in the new province of Shariff Kabunsuan, bringing the total number of LMTs in conflict-affected areas to 14.

¶8. (SBU) BG Guerrea and MG Khan identified one of the greatest challenges to peace in Mindanao as traditional "rido" (clan feuds); "there seems to be no end to rido," said Khan. They identified other key challenges and "gaps" as: conflicts over "personal interests;" land and water supply issues; firearms in the hands of unauthorized persons; inadequate support and/or mishandling of internally displaced persons; the presence of terrorists, criminal syndicates, and other lawless elements; the emergence of "a third party" determined to sabotage the peace process; exposure of cease-fire mechanism officers to physical harm; the vulnerability of the cease-fire to suspicion, bias, criticism, and loss of confidence; and, "provocative statements" that could undermine the peace process.

AHJAG To Remain

¶9. (SBU) MILF/AHJAG Chairman Dataya emphasized adherence to AHJAG's formal procedures/guidelines (e.g. validation of target information, timely provision of written requests, and advance notification) to reduce the potential for misunderstandings and conflict during operations against terrorists and criminal syndicates. With an exception for "high priority targets," Dataya noted that the AHJAG was required to inform the Philippine Government/CCCH and MILF/CCCH at least 24 hours in advance of conducting an operation. He further noted that paramilitary and irregular forces were not allowed to enter MILF areas in hot pursuit of

criminals.

¶10. (SBU) Philippine Government/AHJAG Chairman MG Dolorfino said that, although the AHJAG's implementing guidelines were due to expire on June 21, the AHJAG mechanism -- created on May 6, 2002 but which only came into effect in 2005 -- would indeed remain operational with or without renewal.

Success Stories

¶11. (SBU) Several participants recounted cease-fire mechanism "success stories," notably the MILF/AHJAG's rescue and turnover of four kidnapping victims -- including a German national -- to the Philippine military May 31-June 1. MG Dolorfino explained how the cease-fire mechanism had also recently prevented Abu Sayyaf Group and Jemaah Islamiyah members in the Sulu Archipelago from relocating to Mindanao. He described an alert against them along the entire coastal area of central Mindanao, which had been "very effective" against these terrorist organizations, and would likely force them to look toward Tawi-Tawi, Malaysia, and/or Indonesia as future places of refuge.

Peace Talks at Crucial Stage

¶12. (SBU) Secretary Afable attributed the postponement of the May 1-2 peace talks in Kuala Lumpur to the May 14 Philippine mid-term elections but expressed hope that the peace panels would soon be able to resume discussions on the final issue of territory now that the elections were over. Afable asked the AFP and MILF participants to insulate themselves from pressure by "those who do not want peace to succeed," and requested support from the AFP, MILF, foreign diplomatic community, and civil society in overcoming obstacles to a strong, just, and durable peace agreement for Mindanao now that the peace talks were at a "crucial stage."

Comment

¶13. (SBU) This was a welcome initiative by the IMT, AFP, and MILF, and again demonstrated a shared commitment both to the

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overall peace process and to the actual peace talks. The Philippine Government was pro-active in ensuring the presence of interested observers, including an Embassy representative, as another recognition that the stakes for peace in Mindanao are broader and deeper than the issues on which the Philippine Government and MILF are currently negotiating. The only dark clouds were the repeated references to a would-be spoiler "third party" and others opposed to peace, whose identities were left unspecified.

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